Nobody gave him a decent word, I reckon. Not till the miracle happened.

It was a hot, steamy June night—the night of the high school commencement. Everybody was there, of course. All the town loafers were hanging around the Opera House doors. Among them stood Richard Bellamy, in his cheap new check suit, forlorn as a ghost. For, with infernal village cruelty, not even a loafer would speak to him. But Richard was so starved for companionship that he'd take contempt, if he couldn't get anything else.

ALL Salerno was streaming in, all gay summer gowns, and high greetings, and laughter. Presently a street-car stopped at the corner. Miss Felicia stepped off, as stately as if she alighted from a gilded coach. (She'd given up her phaëton the year before. Everybody wondered why.)

She drifted slowly up the dusty steps. As always, she walked alone. Much as we loved her, nobody ever presumed to elbow up and walk beside Miss Felicia. At the top step she paused, in the full light. I looked at her, and said to myself that she was twenty-seven years old that very month; yet she was lovelier and younger than any of the rosebud girls that would graduate that night.

She did not see me. She was looking past me, past her nodding, smiling groups of friends, straight across at Richard Bellamy.

A moment she paused. Then her beautiful face flushed pink; her dark eyes lighted. Across the portico she went, straight to Richard Bellamy. Right in the face of pop-eyed Salerno, she put out one slender white-gloved hand.

"This is Mr. Bellamy, I know," she said, in her clear, carrying voice. "I am glad to see you, Mr. Bellamy. I have long been in your debt for your courage in helping me check my horses, that morning years ago. I am happy to thank you now."

Richard didn't speak. He didn't put out his hand. He just stared and stared, as at some embodied dream.

"You are attending the commencement?" her clear voice went on. "I happen to have an extra ticket. Will you not use it? I shall be so glad."

And into the crowded Opera House swept Miss Felicia Stafford, with Richard Bellamy, jail-bird, at her side.

Well! I needn't tell you that Salerno just lay back and gasped. And when Salerno finally caught its breath—I needn't tell you what happened then. Everybody agreed that Miss Felicia, our lovely princess, should be spoken to. She must be reminded of Richard's disgraceful past. But who would dare to speak?

HOWEVER, Miss Felicia herself cut that tangle. A month later she gave her yearly reception to Salerno. It was by far the most sumptuous entertainment she had ever vouchsafed us. In her filmy gown, decked with her quaint old jewels, never had Miss Felicia looked so exquisite. My heart all but stopped when the first dance was called and Miss Felicia stepped out on the polished floor. Graceful as a dryad, she trod. Beside her, straight and tall and defiant in his shabby evening clothes, stepped Richard Bellamy.

That shock was too much. I reckon it shortened the days of some of the worthiest members of our Woman's Club. But worse was to come. Next thing we knew, Richard had fired up his rickety steam-shovel and was draining Miss Felicia's bottoms farm. Next, Miss Felicia brought him to the First Presbyterian Church three Sundays in succession, and they sat together in the old Judge's pew. And the next cataclysm—

"I don't believe it!" I gulped, when Augustus told me. "I sha'n't!" Whereat I fled trembling up to the old Stafford place, my knees shaking with every step.

Felicia met me at the door, sweet, cordial, serene.

"Felicia, I've come—" I quavered.

"You've come to give me your blessing; haven't you, Miss Lillie?" Felicia held up her little soft hand. On the third finger shone a thin gold band, with an old flat-cut emerald, gleaming dark.

"It was Richard's mother's," she said softly. She laid the dusky old jewel against her warm, flushed cheek.

"But, Felicia—oh, Felicia! When you think what he—what he—"

"What he has had to endure?" Felicia's dove eyes flashed. "I don't let myself think of that often, Miss Lillie. I'm trying to help him forget, too. For we're beginning again, together, you know. It's going to be a new life for us both."

"But, Felicia, have you realized—"

"What people will say?" Her soft laugh rippled. "That he's marrying me for my money? They'll learn better. For I'm mighty near as poor as Richard, Miss Lil. When dear father died, the property was badly involved. And now I have nothing left, except my house, and my bottom-land farm. Richard has Carruthers' Folly and his boats. So we're starting even."

I sat down, breathless.

"Felicia! Yet you gave that grand party! Of all the mad extravagance—"

"That ball was my swan-song, Miss Lillie. No more balls for me. I wanted it gay and lavish and memorable for Richard's sake. Don't you see?

"One thing more, Miss Lillie." She bent to me swiftly. Her eyes flashed into mine. "Salerno must know, once for all, that I'm not marrying Richard to reform him. Reform Richard Bellamy! When he's the bravest, strongest, most wonderful— No; I'm marrying him because I love him. Because I love him with my whole heart and life and soul. Oh, dear Miss Lillie! Can't you wish us happiness on our long road together?"

Well, that was enough for me—chicken-hearted old ninny! I caught Felicia into my arms, and hugged her, and cried over her, and vowed she was making the wisest, truest choice of her whole life. And I went to that wedding, the only guest save the little dim aunt and the minister and his wife. But eye never saw a lovelier bride.

Yet I kept turning from Felicia's white radiance to stare at Richard Bellamy. He held his graying young head high; he stood up straight as a lance. His eyes clung to Miss Felicia's face as the eyes of one long blind might cling to the promise of sight. Yet upon him there lay still that dull, ineffaceable stain: that weariness, that blank despair. Yes, the prison brand had burned deep. With all her wisdom, with all her tenderness, could Miss Felicia ever heal that scar?

She tried hard enough, you'd better believe. All that summer she played the bride, gay, glowing, arrogant, and played it to a fare-you-well. She strolled with Richard down the twilight streets, her frilly skirts flaunting, her face like the heart of a rose. She bragged of him to her gaping callers with the sweetest gay insolence. She quoted him, and praised him.

BEHIND the scenes, she worked with him shoulder to shoulder. She was comrade and yoke-mate, with all her adoring might. And Richard played up to her lead. Whatever faults he had, there wasn't a slack bone in him. He worked like a horse, and he thrived on it. His color came back; his body grew straight and strong; his very youth awoke in him. But, for all their love and toil and passionate ambition, everything went awry.

First, there was her bottoms farm. It was rich land, but hardly worth planting, for Paint Creek overflowed and washed the crops out, year after year. Richard started to deepen the creek channel, working like a stoker, fourteen hours a day.

"Richard will make that land pay, for the first time," declared Miss Felicia proudly. "His grasp of drainage problems is astonishing."

Three months of tremendous hard work, and he had deepened the creek bed, rebuilt his fences, and finished his fall plowing. Right then, if you please, along came a court decision confirming a heavy assessment on the bottoms land-owners for a new levee. All Richard's hard work was a total loss. Moreover, the assessment was so severe that Miss Felicia decided to sell her farm rather than borrow money to pay it.

Dire ill luck, that! But Miss Felicia said serenely that Richard had sold the land to excellent advantage. It was a cash sale, anyhow—what there was of it.

THEY spent that pitiful little sum in furbishing up Carruthers' Folly, to rent. But for a year no tenants appeared. At last Miss Felicia leased it to the contractor who was building the cement plant. He made it a hilarious Liberty Hall. At the close of a convivial week-end, somebody threw a lighted match into a waste-basket. It was a windy October night. Half an hour more, and Carruthers' Folly was a smoking heap.

"Insurance? N-no." Miss Felicia smiled, with white lips. "But, as Richard says, we're rid of that odious tenant. *That's* something!"

Well, the land wasn't burned. It was a splendid terrace overlooking the river. Richard rolled up his sleeves and pitched in. He cleared away the ruin, and put up six trim little shacks, cottages for the Chautauqua people. He built them himself, with Miss Felicia helping, wherever he'd let her. She painted the walls, and stained the floors; she braided rugs and mended old furniture; she spent every penny she dared for bright new tins, and stoves, and china.

SHE and Richard were worked down to the bone by spring, but they were bubbling with satisfaction. Here was an investment that would pay them dividends for years to come. Then, like a bolt from the blue, didn't the Chautauqua managers sell the old grounds, and rent a new location ten miles up river!

That was an ugly blow. But Miss Felicia laughed, undaunted. She'd make those cabins pay, willy-nilly! She emptied the six little kitchens, so painfully eked out, had Richard rig up a cook-tent, then advertised the cabins for a private summer camp. By luck, she rented them for six weeks—but only six weeks. It was too lonesome. Folks wouldn't come.

Meanwhile Richard wasn't twirling his thumbs. He was timekeeper at the cement plant; he kept books evenings; he got up at gray dawn to work in the garden. They needed all he could earn; for the little dim aunt was dying, after a long, costly illness. He even went to Kansas, that summer, and bossed a harvesting gang. He was foreman of an ice-cutting crew the next winter. He snatched at work wherever he could lay hands on it.

But old Colonel Bellamy had brought up his sons "like gentlemen, suh," so Richard must take what he could get. Besides, nobody would give him a real job—because he'd been sent to the pen, you know.

Maybe a year more, and the fates relented—a little. The cement plant was having a hard time to keep labor. The men were restless and discontented, with no amusements within reach. Richard and Felicia talked the matter over; then Richard went to the chief with a plan.

Richard's old flat-boat was tied up alongshore. He offered to calk it and paint it, set up plank walls and roof, put

"Never had Miss Felicia looked so exquisite. Beside her, straight and tall and defiant, stepped Richard Bellamy."